TELLS THE FACTS AND NAMES THE NAMES

# CounterPunch

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## *Three Tributes to Ben Sonnenberg*

### Farewell to a Friend

### By Alexander Cockburn

Ben Sonnenberg died on June 26, at the age of 73, and with his passing *CounterPunch* has lost its longtime counselor. The world has lost a true humanist, in the Renaissance heft of that word, one in whom refinement of taste, wideness of culture mingled with political passion. I mourn a very close friend.

His greatest literary achievement was *Grand Street*, the quarterly he founded in 1981 and edited till 1990, when multiple sclerosis was far advanced and his fortune somewhat depleted. His friend Jean Stein took the magazine over and it ran till 2004. As he put it laconically, "I printed only what I liked; never once did I publish an editorial statement; I offered no writers' guidelines; and I stopped when I couldn't turn the pages anymore." As another great editor Bruce Anderson, of the *Anderson Valley Advertiser*, wrote after Ben's death, "*Grand Street* under Sonnenberg was the best literary magazine ever produced in this doomed country. His *Grand Street* was readable front-to-back. If you've never seen a *Grand Street*, the last literary quarterly we're going to have, hustle out to the last book store and get yourself one and lament what is gone."

When I first came to New York in 1973, I went to a couple of parties thrown by Ben's father, Ben Sr., one of the trailblazers in public relations who gave elaborately staged parties to advance the interests of his various clients, at 19 Gramercy Park. He looked a bit like a comfortably retired Edwardian bookie in 1890s London, with enough knowingness in his glance to deliver "fair warning" to the unwary. Though he publicly prided himself on never have taken a dime from either Howard Hughes or the Kennedys, Ben Sr. certainly milked big clients like General

**COCKBURN** CONT. ON PAGE 4 COL. 2

## *The Gulf Catastrophe, continued*

## How BP and the Obama Administration have been Joined at the Hip

### By Jeffrey St. Clair

By the morning of May 24, the tide had turned against President Barack Obama in the Gulf crisis. Weeks of indecision at the White House and the Interior Department had shifted the balance of blame. BP was no longer seen as the lone culprit. Now, the Obama administration was viewed by many – including some senior members of their own party – as being fully culpable for the ongoing disaster off the coast of Louisiana. The political situation was so dire that Rahm Emanuel called an emergency meeting in the Oval Office to regroup. Huddling with Obama and Rahm that bleak morning were Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano, Interior Secretary Ken Salazar, Coast Guard Commandant Thad Allen, climate czar Carol Browner and, most cynical of all, economic advisor Lawrence Summers, author of an infamous 1991 memo at World Bank calling "the economic logic behind dumping a load of toxic waste in the lowest wage country [...] impeccable and we should face up to that."

The president was pissed. In a rare display of emotion, Obama ranted for 20 straight minutes. The target of his anger wasn't BP but the press. He fumed that he was being unfairly portrayed as being remote and indifferent to the mounting crisis in the Gulf. "Hell, this isn't our mess," Obama railed. The president expressed particular contempt for Louisianan James Carville, whose nightly barbs on CNN seemed to have found their mark. After two hours of debate, Obama's Gulf crisis team arrived at the dubious conclusion that the main problem was that there were simply too many public voices speaking for the administration. No one seemed to be in control. There were discordant accounts of the severity of the spill between the EPA and the Interior Department. Agencies were intruding on each other's terrain.

So, it was decided that the administration would speak with one voice, and that voice would be Thad Allen's, the portly Coast Guard commandant who had been lauded in the press as a heroic figure in the aftermath of Katrina. It was the wrong lesson to draw after a month of false moves. The problem wasn't message control, but a profound bureaucratic lethargy that ceded almost absolute control over the response to the spill to BP. This fatal misstep came courtesy of yet more bad advice from Ken Salazar, who told Obama that under the terms of the Oil Pollution Act of 1990, passed in the wake of the wreck of the Exxon Valdez, BP was legally responsible for the clean-up of the Gulf.

Salazar's logic was perverse. He reasoned that, by giving free rein to BP under the cover of the Oil Pollution Control Act, the administration could keep its hands clean and blame any failures in the Gulf on the oil company. This strategy blew up in the face of the administration. It was all over once Rep. Ed Markey pressured BP into releasing the live video feeds from the remote-controlled submersibles, showing the brown geyser of crude erupting from the remains of the failed blowout preventer.

But now the administration was boxed in to an untenable position. Instead of distancing itself from BP, the Obama team, thanks to Salazar, found itself shackled to the company. Two weeks

**ST. CLAIR** CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

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**ST CLAIR** CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

after the blowout, a top Coast Guard official went so far as to praise "BP's professionalism" during a nationally televised press briefing.

It should have been different. Within hours of the explosion, the federal government should have seized control of both the well and the cleanup operations. The only responsibility that should have been left to BP was to sign checks for billions of dollars. The authority for such a takeover derives from an administrative rule called the National Contingency Plan, which calls for the federal government to take authority over hazardous waste releases and oil spills that pose "a substantial threat to the public health or welfare of the United States based on several factors, including the size and character of the discharge and its proximity to human populations and sensitive environments. In such cases, the On-Scene Coordinator is authorized to direct all federal, state, or private response and recovery actions. The OSC may enlist the support of other federal agencies or special teams."

The National Contingency Plan, written in 1968, came in response to one of the world's first major oil spills and cleanup debacles. On March 18, 1967, the Liberian-flagged supertanker *Torrey Canyon*, taking a dangerous shortcut near Seven Stones reef, struck Pollard's Rock off the coast of Cornwall, gouging a deep hole into the holds of the ship. Over the course of the next few days, oil drained into the Atlantic. Then, on Easter the ship itself broke in two, releasing all 35 million gallons of crude oil, owned by, yes, British Petroleum into sea. The wreck plunged the government of Harold Wilson into crisis mode. The government allowed BP to pour millions of gallons of an unproven and toxic dispersant on dark-stained waters – the chemical had been manufactured by a subsidiary of the oil company. When that proved to have little effect, the Wilson government called upon the Royal Air Force to conduct a bombing raid on the *Torrey Canyon*. The planes dropped 42 bombs in effort to sink the ship and burn off the oil slick. The sea burned for two weeks, but the incendiary raids did little to stanch the oily tides. In the end, more than 120 miles of the Cornish Coast were coated in oil and the spill took a heavy toll on fish, birds and sea mammals. The crude spoiled beaches from Guernsey to Brittany.

**When Rahm Emanuel summoned the administration's oil response team to the strategy session in the Oval Office, he didn't send an invitation to Lisa Jackson, the spunky head of the Environmental Protection Agency. Why was Jackson missing?**

In order to avoid a similar cleanup folly in the U.S.A., the National Contingency Plan called for a single agency to take swift control over big oil spills. That agency was the newly created EPA. But when Rahm Emanuel summoned the administration's oil response team to the strategy session in the Oval Office, he didn't send an invitation to Lisa Jackson, the spunky head of the Environmental Protection Agency. Why was Jackson missing? Because she had reportedly incurred the wrath of BP executives for pressing the company to curtail its controversial use of the toxic dispersant Corexit. Also noticeably absent from the Obama brain trust were two other officials who might have contributed a more realistic appraisal of the deteriorating situation in the Gulf: Jane Lubchenko, director of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), and Energy Secretary Stephen Chu, winner of the Nobel Prize, so often invoked by White House press secretary Robert Gibbs as a public assurance that the administration was on top of the situation. Each had been inexplicably exiled from Obama's inner circle.

It didn't help, of course, that in the early days of the disaster Obama's officials opted to downplay the severity of the oil gusher erupting out of the crumpled riser pipe 5,000 feet below the surface of the Gulf. In the first official remarks from the administration after the explosion of the Deepwater Horizon rig, Coast Guard commandant Thad Allen, told the press that the spill was expected to be very minor, amounting to only the few thousands gallons of crude present in the mile-long pipe at the time of the accident. This false information flowed directly from BP. A few days later, after the incinerated rig had toppled and sank to the bottom of the Gulf, this specious number was revised upward to a total of no more than 1,000 gallons a day. So said Allen, incident commander for the Gulf. Again, Allen had made this optimistic assessment based solely on information coming from BP. Two weeks later, the upper limit for the leak was raised to 5,000 barrels a day.

But NOAA knew better. In fact, in the hours after the spill, top NOAA officials gathered in Seattle for an emergency session that was streamed live on the agency's website. The video feed, which was later removed from the website, captured the agency's top scientists at work. Their initial survey of the scope of the spill proved prescient. One scientist warned that the agency needed "to be prepared for the spill of the decade." Another NOAA scientist charted out the worst-case scenario on a whiteboard: "Est. 64k-100k barrels a day." Right on the money, even though it took the Obama administration more than 50 days to admit that the oil was flowing at a rate of more than 14,000 barrels a day.

Of course, the administration could have simply subpoenaed BP's own re-

**CounterPunch**

EDITORS
ALEXANDER COCKBURN
JEFFREY ST. CLAIR

ASSISTANT EDITOR
ALEVTINA REA

BUSINESS
BECKY GRANT
DEVA WHEELER

DESIGN
TIFFANY WARDLE

COUNSELOR
BEN SONNENBERG
1937-2010

CounterPunch
P.O. Box 228
Petrolia, CA 95558
1-800-840-3683
counterpunch@counterpunch.org
www.counterpunch.org
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cords, as Congressman Ed Markey eventually did. On June 20, Markey released an internal memo from BP that estimated that as much as 100,000 barrels a day might be surging out of the broken wellhead. Far from fact-checking BP's information, some members of the Obama administration were acting as conduits for the company's lowballing. None played a more important role than Sylvia Baca, whose facility with moving seamlessly between the government and the corporations she was meant to regulate should had won her frequent flyer points for trips through the revolving door. Last summer, Ken Salazar appointed Baca to serve as assistant administrator for lands and minerals of the scandal-rife Minerals Management Service (MMS). This powerful but shadowy post did not require Senate confirmation. Thus, Baca's previous career did not become the subject of public inquiry.

Salazar had plucked Baca right from the ranks of BP's executive suites, where, according to her CV, she served "as general manager for Social Investment Programs and Strategic Partnerships at BP America Inc. in Houston, and had held several senior management positions with the company since 2001, focusing on environmental initiatives, overseeing cooperative projects with private and public organizations, developing health, safety, and emergency response programs and working on climate change, biodiversity and sustainability objectives." Prior to joining BP, Baca spent six years at the right hand of Bruce Babbitt, serving as assistant secretary of the Interior for Lands and Minerals Management.

Baca's years in the Clinton administration proved very productive for the oil industry as a whole and her future employer in particular, a period when oil production on federal lands soared far above the levels of the first Bush administration. An internal Interior Department memo from April 2000 spelled out the achievement for Big Oil: "We have supported efforts to increase oil and gas recovery in the deep waters of the Gulf of Mexico; we have conducted a number of extremely successful, environmentally sound offshore oil and gas lease sales; and we have opened a portion of the National Petroleum Reserve in Alaska to environmentally responsible oil and gas development, where an estimated 10 trillion cubic feet of recoverable gas resources lie in the northeast section of the reserve."

The memo goes on to highlight the feats in the Gulf of Mexico, which saw a tenfold increase in oil leasing during the Clinton years. "From 1993 to 1999, 6,538 new leases were issued covering approximately 35 million acres of the Outer Continental Shelf… Lease Sale 175 in the Central Gulf of Mexico, held on March 15, 2000, offered 4,203 blocks (22.29 million acres) for lease. The Interior Department received 469 bids on 344 blocks. There were 334 leases awarded… More than 40 million acres of federal OCS blocks are currently under lease. Approximately 94 per cent of the existing OCS leases (7,900) are in the Gulf, and about 1,500 of these leases are producing… Issued over 28,000 leases and approved over 15,000 permits to drill… Implemented legislation changing the competitive lease term from five years to ten years, allowing lessees greater flexibility in exploration without endangering the lease." Thus had the table been set for the depredations of the George W. Bush administration.

**Another NOAA scientist charted out the worst-case scenario on a whiteboard: "Est. 64k-100k barrels a day." Right on the money, even though it took the Obama administration more than 50 days to admit that the oil was flowing at a rate of more than 14,000 barrels a day.**

Mission accomplished, Baca settled into her high-paying gig as a BP executive. One of Baca's roles was to recruit Hollywood celebrities to help greenwash the oil giant as an environmentally enlightened corporation, which was engaged in a mighty war against the evil forces of climate change. When Baca left BP to join the Obama administration, they weren't left in the lurch. As the curtains closed on the Bush administration, BP recruited one of the Interior Department's top guns to join its team. As the chief of staff for the MMS in the Gulf Region, James Grant had worked to make sure that deepwater leases moved forward with, as he put it in one memo, "few or no regulations or standards."

Having succeeded in this endeavor, BP enticed Grant to join their team as their "regulatory and environmental compliance manager" for the Gulf of Mexico, an assignment that included shepherding the Deepwater Horizon through the regulatory maze at MMS. Grant began lobbying his former colleagues in the Interior Department to open currently protected areas to oil leasing, particularly in the eastern Gulf of Mexico near the coast of Florida. Grant also warned the Obama administration, including his former corporate colleague Sylvia Baca, not to cave in to demands by environmentalists for "policies that may establish exclusionary zones, disrupt MMS leasing or affect opportunities for economic growth." He needn't have worried.

It's clear that Sylvia Baca should never have been eligible to resume her job at the Interior Department. Obama had piously pledged to close the revolving door and bar corporate lobbyists from taking posts in agencies that regulated the activities of their former employers. Several environmental lobbyists were denied positions in the Interior Department and EPA under these supposedly ironclad ethics rules. However, Baca slipped through at the behest of Salazar who made a special appeal to Attorney General Eric Holder. Salazar told Holder that Baca was an "indispensable" member of his team, emphasizing her "detailed knowledge of Interior's land and energy responsibilities."

According to Deputy Interior Secretary David Hayes, Baca recused herself from all leasing decisions regarding BP. However, sources inside the Interior Department tell me that Baca played a key role in a procedural decision in the early days of the Obama administration that allowed the Deepwater Horizon project and Big Oil operations on federal lands to move forward with scant environmental review. The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) is a federal law passed during the glory days of environmental legislation, otherwise known as the Nixon adminis-



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tration. It requires a full-scale environmental impact statement (EIS) for any federal project that might pose a "significant impact on the quality of the human environment."

These EISs often run to more than a 1,000 pages in length and evaluate the possible ecological, social and economic consequences of the proposal, including worst-case scenarios. These documents are prepared by the permitting agency with consultation from the Fish and Wildlife Service and the EPA. But an administrative order during the second Bush administration ordered the Minerals Management Service to issue "categorical exclusions" from NEPA compliance to Big Oil projects in the Gulf and Alaska. In addition, the Bush administration allowed the oil companies to prepare their own safety and environmental plans, which would then be rubber-stamped by officials at MMS. From 2001 through 2008, more than 2,400 oil leases had been allowed to go forward in the Gulf without any serious environmental review.

When the Obama administration came into power, this policy was under furious legal and political assault by environmental groups. But Salazar was zealous that there would be no interruption in the pace of oil leasing in the Gulf. In fact, he wanted it speeded up. Restoring NEPA compliance to the oil industry, Salazar's enforcer, Baca warned, would slow down the approval process for leases by a year or more and, even worse, make the projects vulnerable to protracted litigation by environmentalists. She counseled that it would be better to stick with the Bush era rules. Salazar agreed. So, it came to pass that on April 6, 2009, the Interior Department granted BP a categorical exemption for Lease 206, the Deepwater Horizon well. The BP exploration plan included a skimpy 13-page environmental review, which called the prospect of a major spill "unlikely." The company told the Interior Department that in the event of a spill "no mitigation measures other than those required by regulation and BP policy will be employed to avoid, diminish or eliminate potential impacts on environmental resources." The request was approved in a one-page letter that imposed no special restrictions on the oil company, warning only that BP "exercise caution while drilling due to indications of shallow gas." Famous last words. **CP**

**COCKBURN** CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

Motors of plenty of moolah, a satisfactory chunk of which he left to Ben.

Ben Jr. detailed his somewhat raffish and caddish youth in his 1991 memoir, *Lost Property*, but I had already known for almost a decade the tastes that he listed on the first page and that endeared me to him: "My favorite autobiographers in this century are Vladimir Nabokov, Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin." A paragraph later he cited "my friend Edward Said," whose savage essay "Michael Walzer's 'Exodus and Revolution' – a Canaanite Reading" Ben had published in *Grand Street* in 1986. There was no other cultural periodical at that time that would have given the finger so vigorously to polite New York intellectual opinion. The finger could be puckish. In January of 1989 he sent me a copy of his offer – which I published in *The Nation* – on behalf of himself, me and others, to Marty Peretz: "Dear Mr Peretz: Do you wish to sell the *New Republic*? May I know your terms? I am one of a small group whose members are eager to buy the New Republic and restore its credit as a liberal journal. We suspect you may be ready to sell from the vacancy and desperation of recent articles, which I at least associate with the moral and material bankruptcy of the state of Israel. I am the editor of *Grand Street*, but none of my associates is in the magazine publishing business."

Ben's decent obit in the *New York Times* by William Grimes mentioned many of the writers he published: Ted Hughes, Alice Munro, James Salter, Susan Minot, John Hollander, Northrop Frye, W. S. Merwin, Christopher Hitchens, Amy Wilentz, and the present writer. But not Edward Said. Their relationship was very close and among my warmest memories are dinners with Ben and his wife, Dorothy Gallagher, in their apartment at 50 Riverside Drive, listening Edward's thunders to the company about some fresh outrage of his enemies, some new libel lavished upon him, the Canaanite – "a mere black man" – and hearing Ben's delighted laugh, raspy and soon spent because there was not much puff power in his body, imprisoned in the wheelchair or propped up in bed. Ben was just such a physical captive for over a quarter of a century, but I never saw him dull of eye or wit, amid what a similarly spry and creatively indomitable Alexander Pope, crippled from the age of 12, half blind and afflicted with asthma, in the "Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot," ruefully called "this long Disease, my life." Great though the editorial achievement of Grand Street was, the resilience that carried him onward through the two decades that followed his *Grand Street* was what seized me. Ben's late style was a marvelously warm and inspiring achievement.

I first met him in 1982, when I conducted negotiations on behalf of my father Claud, whom Ben wanted to write a memoir about spies and the Spanish Civil War. I reported to my father the large sum Ben had agreed without much demur to pony up, and Claud duly turned in a very funny essay, full of astute observations about Guy Burgess and spy mania, but also with a wonderfully tragicomic memoir about the strange death of Basil Murray and his ape in Valencia. (It can be found on our *CounterPunch* site, in my piece on the centennial – April 12, 2004 – of Claud's birth.)

Soon I was writing for Ben myself, and it was always agreeable. He was good at soft-edged editorial blackmail, designed to propel one past the finishing post. The substantial checks spurred creativity, too, and, by 1985, I managed a very long memoir about my childhood, "Heatherdown," which was well received. I never would have written it, if it hadn't been for Ben.

When, to his irritation, I quit New York for Key West in the early 1980s and ultimately settled here, in northern California, he would refer to my location as though it was in Kamchatka, filled with metropolitan wonderment that we could even communicate past the barrier of the Rocky Mountains, the wastes of the Great Basin, the Sierra, even unto a northern Pacific shore on which he had never, would never, set eyes. But we spoke on the phone constantly, and I like to think these hundreds of parleys – interspersed with occasional visits – brought us far closer than if I had been trudging down the West Side from my old roost on Central Park West and 94th street.

Ben always made me think of Proust: because of his cultivation, because Proust had spent so much time in bed (a surprisingly small one, now ensconced in the Carnavalet museum in Paris, not much wider than Ben's), because so many chats sent us off down the boulevards of common memory. He had been a young *flâneur* in London in the 1960s and, no

**COCKBURN** CONT. ON PAGE 6 COL. 3



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## *The Political Economy of Migrant Labor*

# Why the Border Can Never Be "Secured"

### By Frank Bardacke

Call it the Political Stupidity Index (PSI). It is the difference between the words the politicians say and the way we actually live. It recently hit near record highs, causing a general to faint as he gave sworn testimony about the prospects of the current imperial war, and prompting a national shudder as pictures of doomed gulls soaked in oil sat alongside articles in which the president assured us that some day soon the Gulf Coast would be better than ever. But the PSI topped out this summer in what passes for public debate on immigration reform, where the words at the top have nothing to do with life at the bottom.

The June spat between Arizona Senator Jon Kyl and President Obama centered on the question of whether our border with Mexico should be secured before something called "comprehensive immigration reform" takes place or border security and reform have to be achieved simultaneously. None of the words mean much. The border cannot be secured. Obama's steep increase in the number of federal agents who patrol the southwest corner of the country has only served to drive up the price of coming across, both the money people pay and the dangers they encounter.

Here in Watsonville, California, a predominantly Mexican farm town nearly 500 miles from the border, the price of coming to the U.S.A. is common knowledge: $3,000 to be driven past a corrupt border patrol agent at an official port of entry, or $1,500 to be guided on a three-day walk through the Arizona desert. Special deals are also bandied about. You can get a ride from a small town in Michoacán to Watsonville, eating well and staying in safe houses along the way, for $7,000; for a bargain price of a thousand bucks, you can take a dangerous eight-day walk farther east of the regular desert routes. That detour is required by the presence of drug cartels that seem determined, people in Watsonville complain, to drive out the independent coyotes, both the honest guides and the cheap chiselers, and to make border crossing a big, corporate business.

The forms of payment vary. Usually the money is due when people arrive in Watsonville. Sometimes part of the money is paid in advance, the rest due on completion of the journey. A lucky few get to pay by the month after they get here, although interest rates are sometimes high. On at least one Watsonville strawberry farm, people can work off their debt with payments taken out of their checks, along with social security and other deductions.

It is all regular, ordinary, and well known, and that's what drives up the Stupidity Index. Despite what may be said in the public debate, people know that there is no way to stop Mexicans coming to the U.S.A., as long as Mexico remains poor and the U.S.A. relatively rich.

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Comprehensive Immigration Reform is another fraud, especially when it is offered by liberals as a way of limiting illegal immigration. Consider the two main proposals: "a path to legalization" and "a guest worker program." Providing undocumented workers with a procedure through which they can fix their papers would make life easier for millions of people, but it would also put more pressure on the unsecurable border, as poor people in Mexico would figure that if they could only get here, eventually they would be legalized. This is not a theoretical supposition. It is exactly what happened after the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act, where legalization prompted increased migration.

The guest worker program – a bad idea all the way around – also would increase the number of undocumented people in the U.S. Again, there is a historical precedent. During the Bracero Program, the last major use of guest workers, thousands of braceros ran away from their camps and escaped into the general population. Called "skips" by the Border Patrol, by the early 1960s they constituted a significant problem, and, along with the introduction of the cotton-picking machine in Texas, the increasing number of bracero strikes in California, and liberal pressure on Congress, the "skips" were responsible for the Bracero Program's demise.

With the Mexican population of the U.S. much larger and more widespread now than it was in the early 1960s, skipping out of a new guest worker program would become a popular enterprise. The only plan being offered to prevent it is complete computerization of the legal status of all workers, plus sanctions against employers who hire the undocumented. But that technological pipe dream is already going up in smoke here, in Watsonville, where U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement pressure on employers has resulted in more companies, some of them quite substantial, hiring workers off the books and paying them cash money.

This is not to say that all is fine in Watsonville, or that Obama's 25,000 federal agents and National Guard troops on the border, coupled with the drug cartel attack on independent coyotes, don't cause undocumented locals some real hardships. Folks suffer on the new long treks through the desert, although I have not yet heard about anyone destined for Watsonville who died en route. Many other people are trapped here, like an ex-student of mine who was unable to visit his dying father in Michoacán because he couldn't afford the exploding re-entry price. Not being able to get back to his job would have meant that he could no longer send money home, money that would be the main support of his soon-to-be-widowed mother.

All of this, however, has less to do with the words politicians speak, the walls they build, or the troops they dispatch to the border than with state of the Mexican



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**COCKBURN** CONTINUED FROM PAGE 4

and U.S. economies. The end of the housing boom in Watsonville, for example, has thrown a different kind of light on border problems. During the boom, a few hundred Mexican workers built a couple of thousand new homes and multiunit condos on the outer edges of our town of no more than 50,000 people. Most of those workers were undocumented, recent immigrants from the traditional sending communities of Michoacán and Jalisco. For a few years, they made pretty good money – up to 1,200 dollars a week for several months of the year.

But bust followed boom, and currently one out of every 11 houses in Watsonville is in some stage of foreclosure. Consequently, new construction has come to a halt, and most of the immigrant construction workers are out of work and unable to get unemployment benefits. In a similar situation at the start of the Great Depression, under pressure from the immigration police and blamed for the bad economy, many unemployed laborers went back to Mexico, returning to the U.S.A. after Roosevelt's victory. That, however, is not much of an option now, for the same reason that my ex-student couldn't go see his father one more time. Moving back and forth across the border according to fluctuations in the job market is prevented by the high cost of crossing. So, "securing the border" has meant more undocumented people staying in the U.S. when otherwise the current Great Recession might have prompted them to return home, at least for an extended visit.

What do people do instead? They are on the road in the U.S.A., following the informal grapevine about where they can find work. Or they go to work locally in the strawberries, but, as they are unskilled at farm work, they earn less than half of what they made building houses. They double up and triple up in homes, apartments, and garages, perpetrators or victims of various schemes to get by. They hold on and hope for better times.

A few have returned to Mexico, where they are just as unemployed as they were here. I know of one construction worker, another ex-student of mine, who after going home returned to the U.S. working as a coyote. (I hope a decent one.) I am told that the most obvious job opportunity for a young man in Michoacán who has lived and worked in the U.S. and, therefore, knows his way around a bit is to work for La Familia, taking drugs across the newly acquired desert routes.

In the park across the alley behind my house, a group of young men play pick-up basketball three or four days a week. Most of them attend some classes at the local community college; two of them attend the local State University, one hoping to make the basketball team. The best player is Jario Cervantes, who has a classic long, lean basketball body, a quick first step, and a consistent fall-away jump shot.

Several months ago, Jario took his father's pickup truck, drove 20 miles and million light years away to the upscale tourist playpen Carmel By the Sea, and walked into the local branch of the Bank of America. He waited in line to see a teller, and, when his turn came, he pretended to have a gun under his shirt and quietly demanded that the teller give him her cash. As she was passing out the money, he apologized for frightening her; meanwhile, she was hiding a GPS device among the bills.

He left the bank, his crime apparently unnoticed, and returned to the truck for the drive home. On the way, he got confused and took a wrong turn through Monterey before he got back on the right road home. Twenty police cars from four different police jurisdictions followed the GPS signal and stopped him 45 minutes after he left the bank. He immediately confessed, explaining that he needed the money to help his dad pay the family mortgage. When his case came to trial, the DA pressed for two years in State Prison. The judge decided that six months in the county jail and five years probation would be enough.

Jario's story does not register in any public debate. His circumstances have no impact on public policy. But a political structure cannot long survive when the official political language has no way to describe life as it is really lived. The way I see it, only two questions remain. How long is long? And how many lives are going to be ruined before the edifice falls?

**CP**

**Frank Bardacke** taught at Watsonville Adult School for 25 years. His history of the United Farm Workers, *Trampled in the Vintage*, is forthcoming from Verso. He can be reached at bardacke@sbcglobal.net

doubt, we passed each other unwittingly from time to time in the Kings Road: I in the long, dark navy velour overcoat, velvet trousers, borsalino hat, chiffon scarf I affected at that time, Ben in the tweed suits made for him on Savile Row and shoes handstitched in St. James. Somewhere around the birth of this century, Ben gave them all to me, and, since we are the same build, I wear the herring-bone Scotch tweeds and the brown brogues often amid the winter chills of Petrolia, sometimes wondering that if I keel over in the road and some stranger finds me and looks at the label on the inside pocket, he'll see "Huntsman & Sons Ltd. B. Sonnenberg 5.6.69" and launch off into some surreal farce of confused identity of the sort Ben loved.

The alumnus of Savile Row and Wilton's, of the Boulevard Haussmann, of Malaga back in the day, was no whimsical dabbler. He was that best mix – serious and radical about politics and art in a fashion that never forfeited lightness of touch (though, to my chagrin, he had no feeling for Wodehouse). He was in at the ground floor with *CounterPunch*, giving money to former co-editor Ken Silverstein to help get the newsletter going and then agreeing to become our counselor, listed as such on the masthead on page 2. It meant a lot to us to have him displayed there. To him also, I hope. Jeffrey St. Clair had the pleasure of watching in Ben's sitting room the spectacle of Al Gore stalking George Bush in that fatal debate, and had an enjoyable long-term phone connection to Ben. Later, for our website, he began to write his brilliant little reviews of movies newly released on DVDs – often of the great directors of his youth, Antonioni, Rosellini, Bresson.

This spring I felt I hadn't seen him for too long. We seemed to be talking less. I feared for his health and jumped on a plane and spent a long weekend in New York. I entered that bedroom in which I had spent so many delightful hours, its paintings and prints in their familiar spots, and here was Ben, not sinking at all but in good voice, his eyes agleam. A dinner with him and Dorothy, Mariam Said and JoAnn Wypijewski was a tumult of laughter and political sallies. And then, three months later, he was gone – taken off by an infection he was too weak to battle. His hundreds of friends were unprepared when he slipped away, sur-



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rounded by Dorothy and his daughters. Of course, I comfort myself with the thought of that last trip. I look fondly and sadly at his suits, the books he gave me along the autograph letter from Zola on my wall. Privileged is the person who has had such a friend. **CP**

# Ben's Class

## By JoAnn Wypijewski

I first laid eyes on Ben in 1980, from a distance. He was well dressed and using crutches, the kind with the metal arm bands, which for some reason had always scared me. As a child, I had imagined the person using them not as weak or lame but as unusually powerful – the crutch translating as a necessary restraint, like a muzzle on a bad dog. Ben loved dogs, especially bad ones, but I didn't know that then. I didn't know much of anything about Ben as he walked into *The Nation* offices that day except that he was someone I didn't care for at all. It was his own fault. He had published two essays in the magazine presenting himself as a selfish, moneyed cad, cavorting in Europe in the 1950s and '60s. These were titled "Lost Property," and I didn't puzzle much over the "lost" part. I was very young and very certain. I had a bit of a class chip. I had never exchanged a word with Ben, but I knew this: I wouldn't like him.

More than a decade later, when *Lost Property* was published as a memoir and the careless fellow who occupies most of the book had become my beloved friend, his re-creation of so much of his own past in the least appealing light struck me as a riddle. For Ben there was no riddle. "I wasn't very nice," he said. But Ben was mischievous even about himself. Keen for gossip and the kernel of truth it contained (and the merest kernel might be all that remained of any other whispered story once it passed through Ben's imaginative circuitry and puckish retelling), he took the gossip of his life – the clothes and acquaintances and sex, the money and entitled insouciance – and used it in a kind of lighthearted argument with himself.

Ben loved women. He loved their styles and their stories and their legs in high heels. He loved language and pork and political sparring, so long as there were jokes and kindness among the company. Almost as much as the dog he loved the goat – featured as the colophon for *Grand Street*. His truest expression, it seemed to me, was beatific with a strong wicked streak. He radiated, without apparent effort, an extraordinary fineness of feeling. Maybe that was just the phenomenon of referred acuity, the heightening of some senses in the absence of so many others. Maybe it was a performance; there was always a measure of that.

Delight was a sensation that Ben cultivated, which is why his magazine, *Grand Street*, was so wonderful. He started it to delight himself and to put money in the pockets of writers he loved, and from there it produced concentric circles of pleasure. Every issue was beautiful to look at: the paper, the type; beautiful to hold, the weight and size of it; appealing to a classical sensibility, high minded but with quirky treasures and a radical bent.

*Grand Street* had the added attribute of putting money in the pockets of literate but poor young women. Almost everyone who worked for Ben was a woman; for a while, beginning in 1981, I was one of them. I proofread galleys of the magazine. My first conversation with Ben was over commas and semicolons. I had written him a rather precise note about the shocking lack of distinction between the two in a piece by Ted Hughes, and he had phoned to tell me that, upon reviewing the argument, Hughes had declared that, indeed, I had a most exquisite sense of punctuation. It was like some absurdist sketch – the timbre of Ben's voice swinging between a question and a song, the subject serious on the matter of rhythm and syntactical relations but comic in its arcana, comic in my desire to be taken seriously and in Ben's mix of gentle fun and appreciation. This, after all, was a man who regularly corrected other people's grammar and recently mourned that the English-speaking world seems to have thrown the rulebook out the window in its ninnyish use of "can't help but."

Embedded in that first conversation was also a little drama about class. Copy editors are on the bottom rungs of any editorial operation. A *Nation* editor once dismissed us as having "the mind of a stamp collector." Ben wouldn't rank people in automatic hierarchies, and anyway a stamp collector might be interesting. He didn't pretend to be blind to the way class works because it had worked for him. It had given him the freedom to be curious even about an otherwise invisible girl like me, who was desperate not to be invisible and who got the work only because she knew a girl who knew a girl who knew Ben. A few years passed before I actually met him, but it was *Grand Street* that upended my foolish certainty about the man I had mistaken for his character of himself, and *Grand Street* that made me curious.

The last time I saw Ben was in May. His great friend Michael Train told me how doctors had said that Ben could live many more years just as he was. It had been more than two decades since he couldn't turn pages, or turn at all. Michael said that Ben took the news of promised longevity wearily. It made sense, but Ben strove not to project weariness. Some combination of natural dazzle, pure will, ritalin, art, work, friendship and the tender-flinty love of Dorothy Gallagher kept him up. He, him and Dorothy, made the hard thing look easy. Now that he's dead, there's not a lot of comfort in thoughts of liberation. Ben


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has sailed away, and everyone who loved him is unspeakably sad. **CP**

**JoAnn Wypijewski** is filing reports to *CounterPunch* in a trip across the United States. Email jwyp@earthlink.net

# Visiting Ben

## By Daniel Wolff

The glint in Ben's eye is wicked. Not that he's going to do anything wicked right now – he's sitting in his New York City apartment surrounded by books and prints – but he's eager to relate a little wickedness. It's a story about a sports car and a beautiful woman and a stop somewhere out in the English countryside. There are no details; that would be indiscreet. The glint in the eye tells all.

Sometimes it's a look of eagerness, of anticipation, almost of hunger. The conversation, this look assures you, is about to turn very smart or funny. That is, you are about to turn smart or funny because Ben will now elicit it, "Tell me about X." Or, "How do you know Y?" And the eyes light up for the story, which he hopes is a long one (if it stays interesting).

Much is judged – there's an astonishing number of books that have been read, movies seen, music heard, theater attended – and opinions must be given. But if they are negative, it's a brief look of disappointment and dismissal. Then it's time to move on to luxurious praise: somebody's beauty, wit, and humor have once again verified an abiding faith in the species' ability to delight.

Now the fierce glint comes when Ben's defending a friend. Of which there are legion. And if they occasionally make mistakes or disappoint, that is nothing compared to their accomplishments and acts of generosity and general brilliance. There is a pantheon of friends, and they are lined up in some Olympus, from which they manage to do good works and persevere in a way that makes Ben grin.

He speaks in a modulated, salty voice, pausing to collect his breath and thoughts. A little dog is barking its way around the apartment. Out the window, the West Side and the Hudson River are keeping busy. One of the disappointments of the wheelchair and the lack of movement is the inability to go birding. They go past too quickly.

In good weather, there's the treat of a slow walk in the park along the river. Tuomas, his assistant, is there to help get the chair up the sharper inclines, but the rest of it Ben steers himself, occasionally glaring at the other guy trying to use the handicapped ramp – he'll just have to wait. Ah, the great and never heralded enough taste of a hotdog bought off a vendor and eaten outside! And the friends met near the rose garden. And the different tugs and boats in the river: their names? Isn't it astonishing all the things we still don't know?

There is the quiet glint of pride that comes with mention of Dorothy, the children, the grandchildren. Nothing matters more. And when he gets tired – when it's time to rest – Ben would have you know that this is his failure. He wishes he could have you stay longer, that he had the energy to share more. Next time. Soon. **CP**

**Daniel Wolff** sent his poems over the transom to *Grand Street,* and Ben Sonnenberg published them. He can be reached at ziwolff@optonline.net



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